

## Asthma is a Public Health Priority

Asthma is a public health priority in the United States, as well as here in North Carolina. In the United States in 2002, there were nearly two million asthma-related emergency department visits, as well as 484,000 hospitalizations due to asthma (N.C. State Center for Health Statistics). Although emergency department data is not currently available in North Carolina, in 2002 there were 11,281 asthma hospitalizations in our state. An economic analysis commissioned by the American Lung Association estimated the 2004 annual cost for asthma in the United States at \$16.1 billion (Coffey). Although 2004 numbers for North Carolina are not available, in 2003 in North Carolina, the total estimated cost of asthma exceeded \$631 million (Coffey).

Many factors can reduce the burden of asthma. These factors can include effective control of environmental triggers; availability of quality asthma-related medical care in the community, including access to adequate education on asthma management practices; and community support for the adoption of positive asthma-related policies. Various environmental factors, or triggers, can have a substantial impact upon asthma episodes and attacks. Working to recognize and properly control these triggers can lead to better asthma management and improved quality of life.

A solid medical infrastructure relating to asthma is also necessary to improve the quality of life for persons with asthma. The North Carolina Asthma Program, the Asthma Alliance of North Carolina, and other key partners can work with physicians and health care professionals to ensure that patients receive asthma management plans and comprehensive asthma education, thus potentially reducing emergency room visits and asthma-related hospitalizations.

Access to care is also an issue. While effective asthma management practices do exist, unless people receive proper asthma education from a health care provider, those with asthma and parents of children with asthma are unaware of measures that they can take to reduce the negative effects of their (or their children's) asthma.

Reduced access to care is often associated with lower socioeconomic status and lack of health insurance. These factors, along with failure to recognize the severity of one's condition, can all impact a person's ability to take advantage of proper asthma care.

The development and support of policies to improve the lives of persons living with asthma are very important. Policies now exist that allow children to carry and self-administer asthma medications at school, which is important for avoiding a serious and potentially dangerous asthma exacerbation. Policies that will provide reimbursement to certified asthma educators are currently being studied, not only on the local and state levels but also on the national level. Increasing the number of certified asthma educators in our state increases the chance that a person with asthma and their family will receive appropriate asthma education.

Asthma is one of the most common chronic diseases, and it cannot be cured. However, with understanding of the disease, including knowing what measures can be taken to control triggers of the disease; with a strong medical community knowledgeable about asthma management techniques; with an effort to increase access to appropriate care for all persons with asthma; and with support for policies promoting an improved quality of life for persons with asthma; North Carolina can make significant strides in the fight against the negative effects of asthma.

